Mermaids and Manatees

Grade Level:
Upper Elementary, Middle School

Content Areas:
Language Arts, Environmental Education, Social Studies, Expressive Arts

Method:
Students describe aquatic animals using a narrative style of writing that, in turn, is the basis for a drawing or painting done by other students.

Materials:
Library or Internet resources, art materials, a variety of photographs of real aquatic animals (insects, amphibians, fish, mammals, etc.)

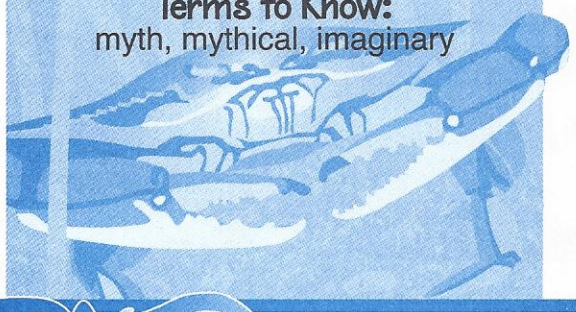
Activity Time:
two 45-minute sessions

People Power:
an even number of groups with three to five persons each

Setting:
indoors or outdoors

Conceptual Framework Topic Reference:
CPIB1, CPIIA, CPIIC

Terms to Know:
myth, mythical, imaginary



Students journey through their imaginations to discern wildlife fact from fiction.

Objective

Students will (1) describe how imaginary creatures may be inspired by actual animals, (2) distinguish between mythical and actual aquatic wildlife, and (3) give examples of how wildlife can inspire myth and art.

Background

For years, wondrous and terrifying accounts of water-dwelling creatures were brought back by sailors and early explorers. These tales gave birth to belief in mermaids, sea serpents, and monsters "too terrible to mention." The Loch Ness Monster, Champy in Lake Champlain, N.Y., and the strange happenings of the Bermuda Triangle are a few contemporary examples of the lure of the sea's mysteries. But were there ever such real creatures? Early sailors claimed to have seen beautiful mermaids with long, flowing hair and undulating fish-finned tails. Later accounts shifted the mythic images to the wondrous and real manatee. This aquatic mammal (sometimes called the "sea cow") inhabits rivers, estuaries, and the open sea. Manatees bear little resemblance to the legendary mermaid. An active imagination and, perhaps, a long isolated sea voyage seem necessary to convert the manatee into the more conventionally captivating image of the mermaid.

Bizarre perceptions are possible if one describes ordinary organisms with detailed imagination, such as aquatic insects or other organisms found in pond water. Investigating such life forms in this way can provide an increased awareness of the characteristics of local habitat and species.

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Procedure

1. Ask students to sit quietly with their eyes closed and to try to picture a mythical creature that lives in a water environment. A mythical creature means an animal that you create in your mind and one that probably never lived outside your mind. Ask each student to picture a creature and prepare to describe it to the class.

2. Ask a few students to volunteer to describe the creature they pictured. Many of their images will likely be the result of film or television experiences.

3. Offer students an opportunity for discussion about classic myths regarding mermaids, sea serpents, and lake monsters. Explore their beliefs about whether they think such creatures were and are real or imaginary.

4. Tell students they are going on a mythic voyage where they will meet a wondrous aquatic creature. Their responsibility will be to have each crew of three to five sailors write as accurate a description of the creature as they can. The crew is to work together to produce a single written description.

5. Divide students into an even number of crews with three to five students in each crew. Provide each crew with an image of an actual aquatic animal. Be sure to select aquatic insects as well as larger animals. Some images in the Aquatic WILD activity "Are You Me?" could be helpful. Tell each crew to keep its animal a secret so that students on other crews do not see the creature.

6. Have members of the different crews find out as much as they can about their animal's actual appearance, behavior, and habitat. Allow them to use any available references or resources.

7. Once the research is finished, ask each crew to begin to develop written descriptions that will be presented to the other crews. Each student should contribute at least two or three lines to the group description. Each student could describe a different characteristic. For example,

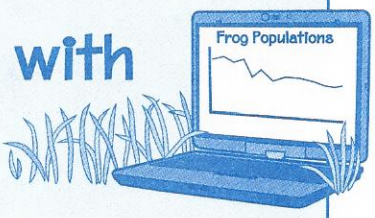
- This creature eats fish and other things in the ocean. It has a parrot-like beak in the middle of long tubes. It swims by forcing water out of its body. It has gigantic, glistening eyes. (An octopus.)
- This is a hump-backed creature with stout, powerful wings. Its offspring live in capsules under water, where they hang onto stationary objects in flowing streams. When they grow up, the females often feed from the blood of humans. Humans attacked by these creatures develop huge, sucker-like welts that ooze fluid from their centers. Discomfort lasts for days. (A blackfly.)

WILD Work

Illustrators, Writers, Dancers, Poets, and other artists use their work to inform and educate the public about the natural world. Through sketches, journals, photography, music, interpretive dance, sculpture, and more, artists can convey factual as well as persuasive environmental messages.

Communications and Public Relations Specialists develop and manage communications programs. These programs include media outreach, public education, websites, and publicizing events. These specialists must have strong writing and editing skills, and they must be comfortable with communication of all kinds including in-person, written, and phone. For links to more information on these occupations, see the WILD Work link at ***www.projectwild.org/aquatic.***

In Step with STEM



- Take a virtual trip to the bottom of the ocean to explore organisms that thrive under extreme conditions away from the sun. Go to ***www.projectwild.org/aquatic*** for links.
- How are humans exploring what many people refer to as "the next frontier?" Research and report on advances in technology that have helped expand our knowledge of the ocean.

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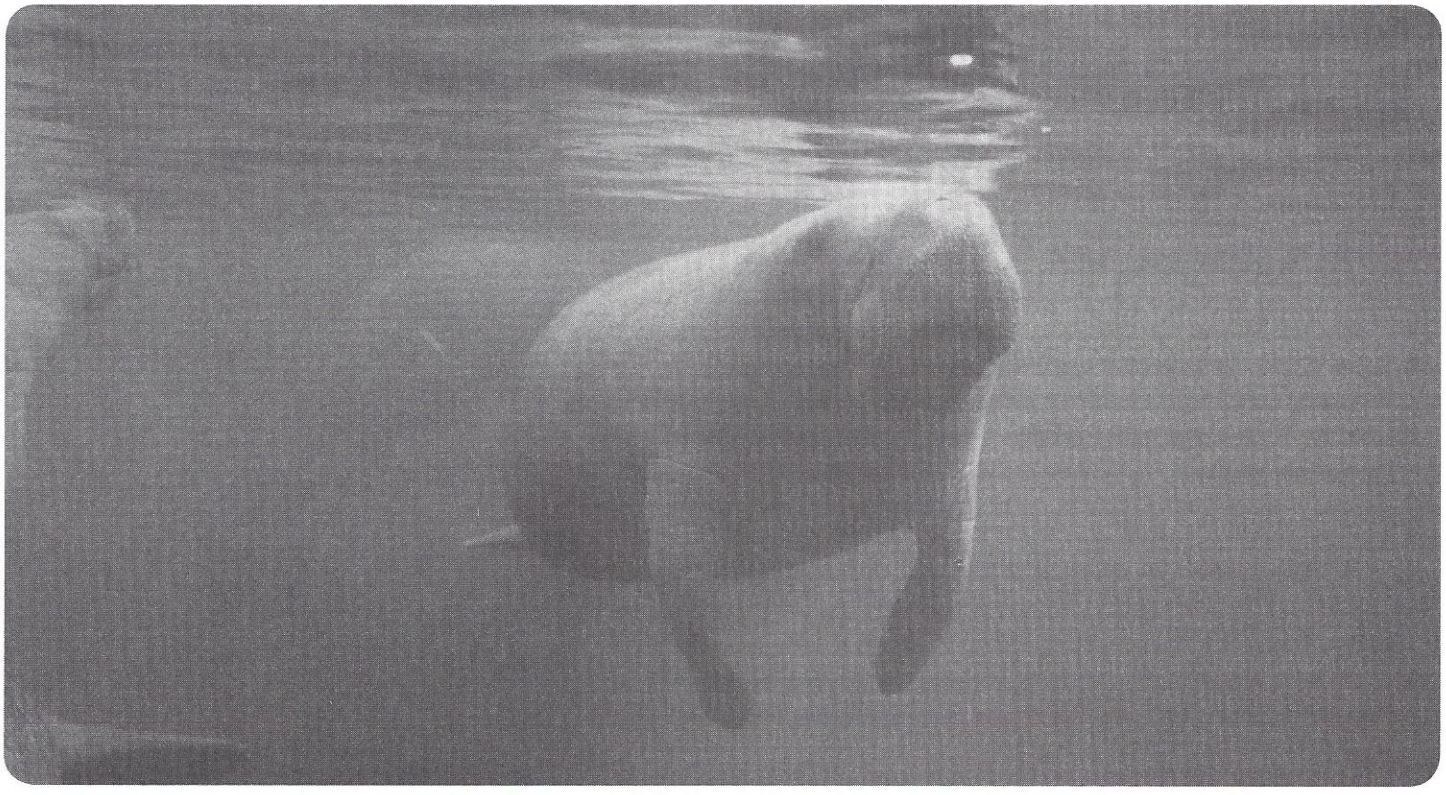
8. Once the descriptions are complete, each crew should prepare to read that group's description to another crew. Copy the descriptions so they can be exchanged in writing, as well as prepared to be read aloud.

9. Have crews pair up, and ask one crew to read aloud its description to the other crew. Provide the written descriptions at this point. The crew that receives the description then must create an image of the creature that was described. Reverse and repeat the process so that both of the paired crews have written descriptions to work with. The members of each crew must now draw or paint images of what they understood the other crew to have described. Individual drawings or paintings can be done by each student or a composite can be created by the entire crew. Limit the number of questions crews can ask of each other.

10. Once both crews have completed their images, compare written or oral descriptions with the resulting artwork. Crews can now reveal their original source photos or specimens, looking for similarities and differences.

11. Display the original source images, written descriptions, and interpretive artworks in clusters on the bulletin board or other display area.

12. Ask students to summarize and review the steps they took, analyzing where they seemed most accurate and inaccurate. Emphasize how readily descriptions can be distorted and exaggerated. Review the actual physical characteristics, habitats,



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and behaviors of all the source animals as a way to emphasize the fascinating variety of real-life wildlife. Ask students to give examples of any artwork or myths they think may be based on actual wildlife.

Extensions

1. Write a mythical story about a real aquatic creature. Show how the myth might have a basis in fact.

2. Research historical mythical creatures, and propose animals that may have provided the source for the myth.

3. Many times people see only part of an aquatic animal while the rest of the creature's body may remain unseen in dark or murky water. To simulate that experience, cover up most of a photograph of an aquatic animal. The animal's identity should not be obvious. Draw pictures of what you think the entire animal might look like. Compare your drawings with the photographs. Discuss how human perceptions form when people have only partial information.

Evaluation

Identify three mythical creatures that may have been inspired by a real animal; then identify the real animal in each case. Describe what the mythical creature is supposed to be able to do that the real animal cannot.

Bizarre perceptions are possible if one describes ordinary organisms with detailed imagination, such as aquatic insects or other organisms found in pond water. Investigating such life forms in this way can provide increased awareness of the characteristics of local habitat and species.